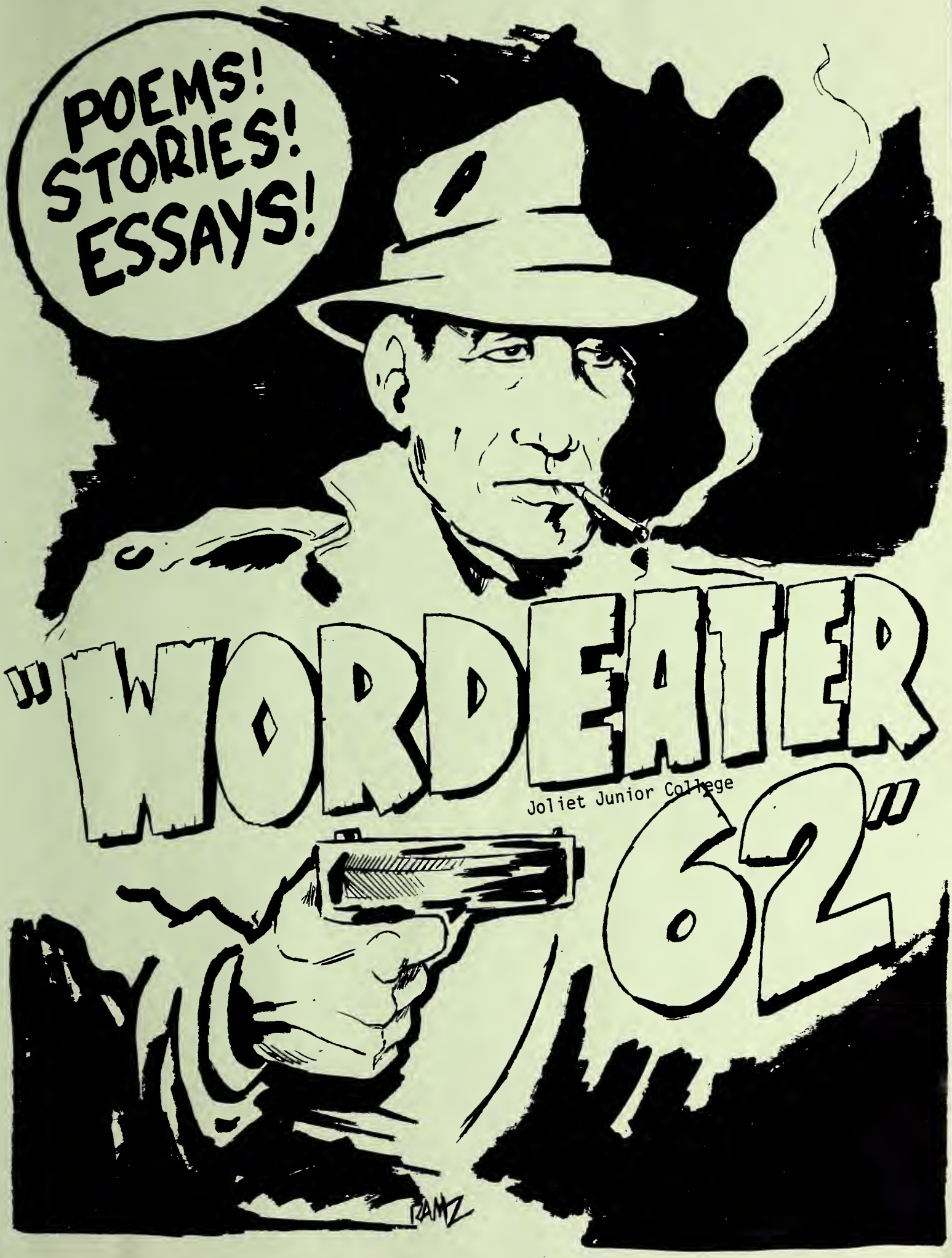
POEMS!
STORIES!
ESSAYS!
"WORDEATER
Joliet Junior College
62"
RAMZ

WORDEATER 62 STAFF;

Donna Aiello
Stanley Holland
Sharon Peck
Barbara Pillasch
M. RamZ
Patricia Shue
John Stobart

NEXT TWO DEADLINES:

February 19, 1988
April 22, 1988

In order to get a selection published in this issue, four of the above had to vote for acceptance. For award winners, only John Stobart is responsible.

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AWARDS

POETRY AND PROSE:

$12.50 to M. RamZ

PROSE:

$12.50 each to
Donna Aiello
James Burkey
Sharon Peck

COVERS:

$20.00 to M. RamZ

Manuscripts or cover designs for WORDEATER 63 must be submitted to John Stobart in Room C-1069 by:

February 19, 1988

Manuscripts will not be returned and SHOULD BE TYPED.

"WORDEATER 62"

Joliet Junior College

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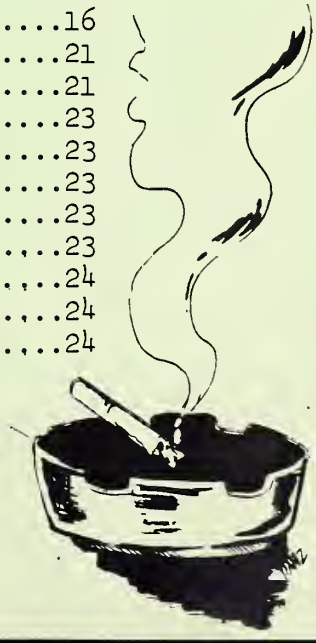

Ruth Gray

CAT FUR

Cat fur
Dog fur
What fur

****

Jacque Kuriger

DAYBREAK

Freshest air,
Sweetest songs,
Sun's bright beams,
Greet the dawn.

Stars are resting,
Skies turn blue,
Night has lifted,
Life starts anew.

Daytime starts
strong and burly,
BUT
Why must morning
come so early?

****

Jacque Kuriger

MORNING ELIXIR

Dirp, drip, drip,
gurgle,
slosh, hisssss....
The brown morning energizer
permeates the air
and pulses wakefulness
To my creeking corners,
Beckoning...
"Come Alive."

****

Sharon Peck

MUSINGS FROM "A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE"

Late night stillness, speak to me
Words of comfort and peace
Hold me
Quiet night

Electric light
Warm me
Illumine me
Wipe my tears away
Away
My fear of the dark

MONEY
YES, MONEY...AND PLENTY OF IT!
YOU
OFFER ME
NOTHING

Another brandy
A little more
Ah...
Keep me company, my friend
Help me to forget
Another brandy
Another
Ah...

****

Out, Old Man!
Deaf fool!
Disgusting drunk!
Out, Old Man!
Wifeandbedawait!
Out, Old Man!
Out!

****

Old Man, I know you
Your tired eyes ask
But cannot receive
Your wrinkled hands grasp
But cannot hold
Old Man, I know you

I, too, ache
I, too, need
I, too, would sleep

****

Judy Belfield

SATURDAY MORNING, 1955

Dress quickly quickly
roll my bathing suit in old towel
race out the door
six houses down
shiver on Sandy's doorstep.
Giggly, gangly
we skip and sprint
to the YMCA.
Swimming in February is delicious
like breakfast in bed--
I imagine, don't know.
In Crafts Class
my papier-mache giraffe,
blurred through chlorine eyes,
takes on impossible proportions.
Sleepy, tasting flour-paste fingers,
I grimace, despair:
tall legs, long neck
sag, droop.
I cannot create this thing . . .
I cannot pass from
Flying Fish to Shark.
Sandy and I in coats, no hats,
munch potato chips on the way to the library
hair icy on our necks.
We gather up books til our arms ache
wait and wait and wait
the checking out.
Hurry up, please, lady,
the bank closes at noon:
the only building in town
with a drive-it-yourself elevator
where we spend what's left of a.m.
ascending to the second floor,
back to the first,
over and over again.
Laughing, pretending:
"Second floor, Madam,"
says Sandy,
"Get out now."
Snowflakes--big, wet--
make soft plops
on the bus windows
as we ride home.
Mom asks what we did.
I say
"Oh . . .
nothing."

****

Jacque Kuriger

GARDEN MEMORIES

Morning glories growing,
spotting color here and there,
Warm, and still, and fragrant
breathes the sunny air.
Pinks and tiger lilies,
yellow marigold,
A variety of herbs,
roses manifold.
Hollyhocks and larkspur,
scarlet, crimson, blue,
Sunshine all around us,
Butterflies and you.

****

Barbara Pillasch

TULIPS

May smiles today and
Nods -- caressed by the gentle
Fingers of the wind.

****

Pamela Sieverin

BUTTERFLY

Did you see the last butterfly of the fall? It is gone now, so don't bother to look, but I'll bet it was just as beautiful as the first one of spring.

Imagine for a minute that you had wings instead of arms. They could be any color you choose. I choose purple.

They are so thin, they're transparent. The black veins forming tiny, delicate, intricate patterns throughout them. As I fly upwards toward the sun, you can see the sky through a purple haze.

My body is long and soft, covered by a soft downy fuzz that repels the dew and rain from my skin.

My tongue curls and uncurls as I sample nectar from hundreds of flowers every

(continued)

Butterfly, continued

day. If you hold me, I will ever so gently kiss your hand with the quick uncurling of my tongue.

As I fly and float on the gentle breezes, I watch the land-bound struggling to lift their bodies heavenward. No matter how hard they try, they can never succeed, not the way I have. For you see, I was once land-bound too. I yearned to fly, and my time came. Now I soar and drift, carefree, with a whole world at my feet to sample.

****

Ruth Gray

RAIN DROPS

Rain drops caught by earth
bring shoots peeping through its crust
To burst forth in bloom.

****

Jodi Bramel

AUTUMN

A small girl in a
yellow slicker,
lunchpail in hand,
Rain misting, breath
visible to the naked
eye.
Trees, some like red-hot
embers, some like
golden halos reflecting
in the puddles on the
street.
And the child walks,
leaves crunching
underfoot
nose running, and
mind wandering about thoughts of
Christmas!

****

Ellyn Bryce

SEA SCAPE

A seltzer sea
White-lipped with anger
Carves raw craters
Scaring the smooth
Windborne beach
The moon shakes
Charging
The oily ocean
To gush
From her low places
And spew debris
With
Barbaric blasts
The wind dies
Summer foam
Traces the lines
Left in the sand
By
Ocean fingers

****

M. RamZ

WHEN IN THE FALL MY LEAF OF LOVE TURNS RED

When in the fall my leaf of love turns red
And when the chill of autumn barrels forth,
Grieved I watch the death toll with much dread--
This genocide of nature lacks not worth.
At last my leaf of love from tree does fall,
I worthless to the flailing crimson flake:
In this, her last few moments does she call
To me, who by the laws must her forsake.
The winter comes too soon again to kiss
The banner of my love with death-like frost;
The blanket doth chill, doth kill my mistress
But she is not the first or last I've lost.
I am the bough that bore her once--her king--
And shall I once more be her sire in the spring.

****

Donna Aiello

CAN'T YOU SEE THE SNICKERING GRIN

Can't you see the snickering grin
The leering eyes
And quivering chin?

Don't you know the hurt and pain
enough to call it
by first name?

Aren't you tired and sick of lies
told with smiles
and loving sighs?

****

Donna Aiello

STRETCHING, SLINKING, SLACKING SHADOWS

Stretching, slinking slacking shadows
cross and mingle, mix and make
moving versions
of ourselves.

Hollow, heavy hateful sounds
whirl and whistle waiting where
rustling color
once hung.

Thoughts and trinkets trailing through
legs and limbs lacking leaf
bare to world
and self.

****

Judith Smith

THE BRACELET

The big house on Illinois Street was very stately. The neighborhood was for upper-class midwestern families. The Victorian influence in America was very prevalent in 1907. The Wright family home represented high status and design. Stained glass windows handsomely accented each room.

The Wright family had gathered in the cozy parlor. It was their room for comfort. The familiar strains of "Happy Birthday" rang through the house.

"Go ahead, Esther. Blow out all ten candles and make a wish too," James Wright said.

"Okay, Father," Esther said.

"Boy, look at all your presents, Esther. Open mine first," Michael said.

The brightly-colored packages were unwrapped. The afternoon sun went down, the parlor lit. The maid, Emily, made sure everyone had fresh punch. Esther sat on the settee with seven-year-old Michael, who was very excitable. Marie Wright sat across the room smiling at her happy children.

"James, dear, why don't you get that special present. I'm sure Esther is anxious for her golden Birthday surprise," she said.

"Here you go, my girl," her father responded, "I hope you'll like it. I wanted to give you something special today. A gift to last."

Esther unwrapped the box. Carefully placed on a cotton pad was a sterling silver bracelet. It was round and had an opening for expansion. On the top were three raised initials, E. A. W.

"Oh, father, thank you. I love it. It makes me look like a grand lady. I bet even Queen Victoria never owned anything so beautiful." She got up, dancing around the room in excitement. Kneeling down by her mother, she showed her the bracelet.

"Have you ever seen anything so lovely Mama?"

"No, dear. I can't say that I have. You are a very lucky girl."

They embraced. Kissing Esther's soft cheek, Marie thought, "May she always be this happy."

James Wright beamed. He felt truly blessed this day.

Esther wore the bracelet faithfully. With the passing of time, its importance only grew.

In the attic, she had a secret hideaway. A big room with crevices and secret places. There she spent hours reading and writing.

Time passed. Somewhere around Esther's fifteenth birthday, she had a

(continued)

terrible trauma. Within one of the secret hiding places was a cigar box. Inside were her journal, some momentoes, and the bracelet. She had left it there when she went swimming at the nearby pond. The box slipped down behind some boards. After a futile search, she got her father to help. In the end, they decided it was hopelessly lost. Short of tearing out walls throughout the whole house, there was nothing to be done. Esther was devastated. Her special, irreplaceable gift was lost. She had written in her journal of hopes to pass the bracelet onto her own family someday.

II

"During tonight's show we will be examining the Contra arms deal," Ted Koppel said. Beverly Columbo sat watching Nightline with only one eye open. Lately it was hard for her to stay awake past ten o'clock. The last trimester of pregnancy tired her.

"Bev, honey. Come up to bed. Be careful on the stairs," Nick Columbo said.

"I'll be careful, Nick. Be right up."

Looking around the living room, she felt a familiar thrill. It was hard to believe they owned this wonderful home. When it went on the market, Bev caught the news frist-hand. She was a real estate agent. This house had been owned by an important family. Bev was told that most of them had moved to Chicago. They were involved in many businesses there. It was Bev's dream come true to live in this old Victorian house.

Going to the front door, she checked the lock. The moonlight shone brightly through the beveled glass door. Bev still couldn't get over the charm this old house had. Over a hundred years old. the house would probably wear them out, but Bev didn't care. Their baby would love growing up here.

Upstairs, the expectant father had been working all evening on the nursery.

"How's it coming, Nick?" she asked.

"Well, this house is great if you don't disturb the original materials. But that makes everything twice as hard to remodel. I own a concrete business, Bev, not a carpenter's. Are you sure you want this divider put into the closet? I'm going to have to move a lot of boards around to stabilize the thing."

"It will make even more storage space in there, Nick. You know how many toys this kid is going to end up with? You can handle any job that you really try! Think how little Anna or Nicholas will love this room," she said.

"If I ever finish it, that is," Nick grumbled.

Bev laughed. He really did enjoy working, but not without a little complaining. Impulsively, she opened the attic door.

"Bev, be really careful up there. I haven't checked those stairs yet for stress."

"Yes, dear, I will," she answered patiently.

Two flights of stairs with a landing in between led to the attic. Again, Bev felt the fascination of owning a piece of history. There were three dormers in the attic. One could sit there looking out over the whole city of Joliet. A flower-patterned wallpaper graced the walls. Bev had heard that the original owners had owned a sizable chunk of railroad stock. If I had that much money, I'd put fancy wallpaper in my attic too, Bev thought.

Wall sections could be opened, some big enough to crawl into. These must have been for storage, or maybe for hiding criminals. Bev laughed at the thought. Old worn linoleum lined the floor. What a wonderful place for someone to hide away in. Bev thought of the baby for a minute. The baby will probably claim this room for himself or for herself.

"Nick, are you almost done for tonight?" Bev yelled.

"Yeah, come on down. I'll be through in one more minute." A sudden crash interrupted his comment.

As quickly as possible, Bev made her way down the stairs. In the nursery, Nick's body was almost lost in the closet.

"Nick, are you all right?" she said. "Oh God, answer me!"

"I'm fine, Bev, calm down. Your closet's a mess though. I must have loosened a support header, and this is what I got. You and your dividers, Bev."

"I know you said it can be tricky

(continued)

remodeling this old house, but I didn't know it was dangerous.

Together they moved the fallen boards. Part of the inside of the house showed where the damage had been done.

"Bev, look at this." Reaching in, Nick grabbed something. It was a cigar box. A very old faded one. Handing it to her, he shrugged his confusion. "Go ahead, open it, Babe."

Carefully, Bev opened the latch, a leather strip around a wooden turnkey. Inside were several pads piled together. A silky, yellow hair ribbon stretched across the length of the box. A few marbles rolled back and forth. A piece of cotton lay in one corner. Moving it aside, Bev exclaimed her disbelief. "Look at this, Nick!" There lay a beautiful silver bracelet. The raised initials were E. A. W. It was exquisite. It only needed polishing.

"Nick, this is a piece of history. Somehow, the owner must have lost this. What do we do about it?"

"Well, look at those pads. There might be a clue to the owner. Start with the initials on the bracelet."

"I think you're right, Nick." Sitting down, Bev took the rubber band off the pads. She quickly become enthralled in the author's words. It was like stepping back in time into someone's shoes.

"Listen, Nick, it says here that the owner's name was Esther. There are a few pages about her tenth birthday. It was a gift from her father. Here, it says Esther Anne Wright, 1907. It says that her dream is to become a writer. Oh, this is truly fascinating."

Bev read on until she finished. All the notes took about an hour to go over. She forgot all about being tired. History had always been a real passion in her life.

"Let's see. If Esther Wright was ten in 1907, then she would be ninety today. Do you think she could still be alive, Nick?"

"Well, she could be. Who can say?"

Bev read one page that really moved her. Esther Wright had written: "Someday I'll give this bracelet to my child. She in turn will pass it onto her child. What a special tribute to Papa. I'll keep this gift as a sign of his love. But, someday I'll pass it on for descendants of James Wright. It's great being ten. I feel so happy today. Esther Wright, newly ten, August 16th, 1907."

"Oh, Nick. You have to read this too," she said.

After a few minutes he looked up. "Hey, maybe we could find her family. Someone should know where such influential people ended up."

The wheels were rolling in Bev's head. That's what they'd do. If any of Esther Wright's family were out there, they would find them.

III

Over the next few days, Bev did nothing but research. At city hall, there were records of the Wright family. Shuffling between departments discouraged her, but she was determined to find Esther's family.

Inside the cigar box was a piece of a church bulletin. The First Presbyterian Church was still open, and Bev found useful information there. In 1912, Esther's father was transferred to Drexel Park, Illinois. They may have ended up there. In the meantime, a brother of James had moved into the Victorian house with his family. The Wright family did transfer their church membership. There had even been a forwarding address. However, that had been many years ago. Nobody knew if there were still any family members left around there today.

Bev phoned Drexel Park and found that there were some Wrights there. "Well, Nick, it seems some family are still there but Esther Wright moved. In 1915, she married Jonathan Evans and they moved to Milwaukee. The church in Drexel Park has no further record on her.

"Well, I guess we'll have to contact the city hall in Milwaukee for more information. Are you sure you feel all right, Bev? The baby is due in two weeks. I am worried about your overdoing it."

"I'm fine. I'll be better after we find the rightful heir to this bracelet. Just think how surprised they'll be."

(continued)

After numerous calls to Milwaukee, they were given several leads. Bev managed to talk Nick into taking her up there. The doctor okayed the five-hour drive because it seemed so important to Bev. They set off the next Saturday.

Milwaukee is spread out. Finally, they found the right street. Bev was nervous. Who would it be? She hoped one of Esther Wright's grandchildren lived here. That was too much to hope for, really. The city could only give them a few addresses of what might be relatives with that name.

The first one they tried was a big two-story. It had a warm look. Nick held Bev's arm as they approached the door. They rang the bell. A woman, about forty-five, answered.

"Hello. Can I help you?" she asked.

"Are you any relation to Esther Wright Evans?" Bev asked.

"Yes, I am. Maybe you had better come in."

Nick and Bev entered. The woman led them to a bench in the foyer. "Now, how can I help you two?" she asked.

Bev tried to explain the unusual story to the best of her abilities. "Somehow, I just have to pass this on to her family. It is the way Esther wanted it to be," Bev told her.

The woman seemed to be amused about something. "I have a surprise for you both. Come with me." She led them through the house. Upstairs, she stopped them. "Wait right here for a moment."

Confused, they just waited.

"It's okay to come in now. This way," the woman said.

Bev walked in first. The room had a lot of atmosphere. There were antiques everywhere. There was a fireplace near the corner of the room. In front of it, sat an easy chair. Within sat a woman. At her feet was a teenage girl. There was a striking resemblance between them.

Light dawned within Nick and Bev at the same time. Bev smiled happily at Nick. "Esther Wright Evans, you're here," Bev said.

"Come here, child. I won't bite. Nor will I fade away," Esther told her.

Bev watched her for a moment. She turned to Nick. He handed her the bag. "Mrs. Evans, we own your family home now. The one on Illinois Street in Joliet. We found something of yours, and we wanted to bring it to you. You lost it long ago," Bev said.

The bag was placed on Esther's lap. As she reached inside, the breath caught in her throat. A tear ran down a thin cheek. She opened the cigar box slowly. Taking it all in she reached for the bracelet.

The girl on the floor got up and put her arms around the frail shoulders. Esther's hands shook. It seemed to all there that she was momentarily taken back to her youth. Bev choked back tears. She was moved by Esther's joy.

Although Esther's hands shook uncontrollably, she reached for her great-granddaughter's hand, and only hesitating slightly, she placed the bracelet on the girls'a arm.

As Esther reached up, Bev bent down to accommodate the older woman. Esther placed her hand on Bev's cheek. No words were needed between them. They were kindred spirits.

****

James Burkey

I'M NOT EGOTISTICAL

I'm not egotistical,
I'm a very humble man.
I'm so incredibly modest
It's more than I can stand.
I'm the humblest person in the world,
NO one's more modest than me.
So don't accuse me of being prideful,
It is too far-fetched, y'see.

****

Jacque Kuriger

A FAILED SUNNY-SIDE UP

Yellow eyed demon,
How dare you wink at me!
Never to gaze
bug-eyed again.

****

Judy Belfield

ONE NIGHTERS

In silver fantasy
she steps fairy feet lightly
sparkling up the grass
by moonlight.
At midnight, in hazy dreams
she remembers encounters
too quickly evaporated into memory,
sees the faces of pretended love
contorting against a garish yesterday.
She cringes, tries to hide
under violet petals--
they weep purple tears
on her alabaster shoulder.
Darkness distends
the sky into inside-out infinity
and stars wink in time
to a slowing heartbeat.
A death-important question
hangs in the silence
of an unsolved mystery
where breath ends
and nothing much
really matters.

****

M. RamZ

ENCORE

The houselights were dimmed, but a few amber hurricane lamps mounted on the distant walls burned weakly in the silence; the cathedral-like room glowed like a soft inferno. The place reeked of stale upholstery.

Mac stood at the top of the red-carpeted aisle, looking down into the crowd of empty gilded seats. In the fourth row center sat a solitary figure--the back of whose head was white and still.

Mac studied the man below, fascinated, yet wearily he extracted his brass pocket watch and frowned at the lateness of the hour. With a speckled hand he replaced the timepiece and adjusted his coarse red uniform.

Behind him the great lobby doors creaked open, desecrating the silence. Mr. Rinaldi--fat, impatient, and stretching the limits of his tuxedo--walked in. He ran a plump pink hand over his shiny black hair and wiped it on his trouser leg. His mustache, glistening with sweat, twitched nervously.

"Still here?" Rinaldi wheezed.

"Yes, sir," Mac answered timidly. "He hasn't moved for over an hour. He just sits there and watches the stage."

Rinaldi threw up his arms in annoyance. He looked tired as he squinted far off toward the stage.

"I hope he's not dead," said the fat man quietly.

"No, sir. He's not dead. He's just sitting there, remembering," Mac explained.

"Hell, the chorus girls weren't that good."

"No sir."

Rinaldi looked up into the high ceiling and studied the carved plaster fixtures. At the top of the dome, a Roman deity hovered ominously in the company of demi-gods. Zeus' face was cracked and peeling and underneath the black wood showed.

"Damn place is falling apart," Mac said with respect in his voice.

Rinaldi glanced at the old man in the uniform. "How long you been with the Fountainbleu?"

"Forty-seven years, sir."

"I bet you seen a lot in those forty-seven years."

Mac thought for a moment. "Yes, sir, I certainly have. I've seen more tragedies, heard more songs, peeped at more chorus girls than any man has a right to. A lot of sound and fury."

The heavy purple curtain billowed upon the stage, as if reminiscing. Gold cupids hung suspended above the stage, frozen in the darkness. The man in the fourth row center leaned forward anxiously.

"All those giants," reasoned Rinaldi furrowing his moist brow. "All dead now. Ever miss those days, Mac?"

"Sir, they were certainly something, and there will never be anything like them again, but Angus McCoy does not pine away about the lost gods and god-

(continued)

desses of the theatre." The old man set his chin firmly in defiance.

Rinaldi coughed lightly. "Good man. Damn place hardly turns a buck nowadays, though."

Mac frowned. "No, sir."

"Well," said the fat man, "Throw the bum out and we can all go home." He turned and went through the lobby doors, leaving behind the smell of sweat and cologne.

With a sigh, Mac walked down into the darkness of the descending aisle. He passed row after row of padded crimson seats, each one bearing a scar or rip from seasons past. At the fourth row he stopped.

The man in the aisle sat transfixed, hypnotized by the endless purple curtain, which rocked back and forth from its own weight. The footlights were gray and lifeless, the pit empty and hollow.

"Good evening, Mr. Attavaris," Mac said politely to the gentleman. His voice echoed reverently throughout the Fountainbleu.

The old actor looked up and smiled. He was older than Mac by a few years and wore an old mothy tuxedo with pin-stripe pants and spats. His face was creviced, cragged, and harbored shadows deeply. His fine, waxed mustache drew back as his pale lips smiled.

"Good evening, my dear friend," he answered eloquently.

"It's rather late, sir."

"An old actor never sleeps," said Attavaris, raising a skeletal hand into the air--the gesture was anemic.

"Unfortunately, the rest of us must," Mac put in delicately.

"Well, I suppose I am being a bit of an eccentric this evening." Attavaris rose. "Just a rich old bastard with nothing else to do."

Mac walked slowly upward with the actor, toward the square lit windows of the exit doors.

"Did you enjoy the show this evening, sir?" Mac asked.

"Yes, yes, but it was nothing to when I was a young man."

"No, sir. Shall I call you a taxi?"

"I believe I will walk home."

"Sir?"

"The Bijou is on my way," the old actor explained.

"I see."

The two old men reached the lobby doors, Mr. Attavaris looked back once more at the stage and saluted it. He left.

Mac shook his head sadly and exited, and the theatre, like the dark yawn of a god, was empty.

****

Judy Belfield

JUST ONCE

Up your side
from hip to chest
lightly
my fingers want
to touch your warm
slightly cooled
skin
feel it respond
tightly
involuntarily shiver.
Silently, I inhale--
a smooth stuccato.
Please do not
misconstrue--
I would not do more.
True, you are a sleek
snow leopard
shaved to a silken finish
but I would not wish more

I am a liar

****

James Burkey

BOUNCING A BALL

Bouncing a ball, up and down,
Sometimes skipping along the ground.
Singing songs of funny sounds,
The little boy pretends that he's a clown.
Laughing and dancing about the town,
His eyes and hair a shade of brown.
A cute little face, spunky and round.
Too bad I didn't see him and ran him
down.

****

Jori Ryan

WE ROW ROW ROW OUR BOATS

We row row row our boats
gently down the streams of life
Merrily Merrily Merrily we go,
But evidently life is but a dream.

****

James Burkey

I HEARD THE NEWS THE OTHER DAY

I heard the news the other day-
They've brought back Nancy Drew.
But now she's having sex and stuff!-
What's the world coming to?
Next we'll have Charlie Brown
Drinking and smoking pot.
Or Mickey Mouse a faggot
And Mr. Rogers getting shot!
The Brady Bunch could rob a bank,
The Monkees will all have AIDS,
Yes, society is going straight to Hell,
And I for one, am afraid.

****

Ruth Gray

THE TREES REACH

The trees reach to heaven
wearing their spring coats of green
In Fall they are torches

****

Barbara Pillasch

MAY SLEEPS AND DREAMS

May sleeps and dreams in
The noonday sun, with lilacs
For her coverlet.

****

Ellyn Bryce

LIFE FOREST

The deep dense forest
is green at twilight
White-tail deer browse
on lace like ferns
Sharp shinned hawks
Skim the skies
With pristine energy
Filling the primordial world
with predatory cries
The canopy of leaves
Closes
like a huge tent
Shutting out
Sunlight
Witch-hobble and beech maple
stand close
Guarding the understory
Beneath them

****

Sharon Peck

AU FOND DE LA TERRE

Professor Lake had warned Jodi about the book.

But she had paid no attention.

Au Fond de la Terre.

The French title had tempted her beyond what she could bear. The foreign words had beckoned to her, appealing to the natural curiosity of a ten-year-old: "Come! Experience the depths of the earth!"

So, against the advice of the elderly botanist, Jodi had removed the leather-bound edition from one of the shelves of his vast library. As she read, she realized, too late, the wisdom of his words.

"Professor Lake!" Her final cries went out from the pages of the book. The terrified girl clutched desperately at the great arms of the wing chair, but they offered no protection. A huge flower-turned-monster brushed its downy hairs against her smooth skin, and

(continued)

laughed, mocking her.

"So! You want to know more about the depths of the earth. Our exalted ruler has been waiting a long time for such an opportunity. Professor Lake was a fool to think he could protect the world from our secret!"

His blooms of fire red and burnt orange served to sap all strength from Jodi as he pulled her down, deep into the ground. He burrowed slowly, relentlessly, refusing to release his grasp on his weakened captive. After what seemed to Jodi an eternity, their dark journey brought them to a strange, black world, where giant plants of enormous proportions that towered above Jodi, filling her with a sense of dread.

The trembling girl was brought before the King Devil, who reigned from his black throne beside murky swamp waters.

"Good work," he congratulated the proud Devil's Paint-Brush. "You have performed well; your actions will not go unrewarded." Having thus excused his loyal servant plant, the king turned his attention to Jodi.

"Well, well," he regarded the unwilling visitor as he straightened his imposing axis. The evil one had two heads, which resembled small black dandelions. Like his servant, his leaves were hairy on the edges. Jodi shuddered, wondering what power might be stored at the base of his stem, where two leaves with prickles at both sides were attached. His keen eyes followed her gaze and he nodded, confirming her suspicions.

"You are wise to be afraid," he warned. "I am very powerful, indeed. Should I choose you as my victim, you have little, if any, chance of survival."

"Why was I brought here?" Jodi's words sounded a weak contrast to his voice of thunder.

"Our land is about to enter the great war between darkness and light. If we prove to the outside world that we can hold but one human against his will, we shall be released from this underground darkness. We shall prevail and light will be no more."

"But what will become of me?"

"What a foolish question! You have obviously been blinded by the light and can't comprehend the wonder of living in darkness. It is a perfect world, as you will see. But enough of this! I'm bored with your questions. Guard! Take her to a cell." He ordered her out of his sight, and a vicious-looking Snake-head led her away.

The plant was well-named as each of his five individual blossoms, when viewed from the side, resembled the head of a snake with his mouth open. He had long, narrow leaves, lance-shaped, edged in sharp teeth. He directed Jodi to a mound of dirt, overgrown with tall Rattlesnake-weeds and roughly shoved her into their midst.

"Don't let those yellow flowers fool you," he warned over his shoulder as he left the prisoner behind. "Those rattlesnakes are mean so I wouldn't try anything if I were you."

Jodi carefully examined the hairless stems that formed her prison bars. She looked at the large purple-veined leaves in a rosette at the base of each plant, their texture reminding her of a rattlesnake's skin. Her eyes moved up their trunks, coming to rest on their flower-heads. They were like dandelions, arranged in loose, open clusters at the top of the forking stems. She stepped forward, thinking briefly of freedom, but the dandelions quickly bent to meet the rosettes, effectively blocking her escape route. She was trapped. And she knew it. Thus she remained, within those prison walls, alone and afraid, wondering what would happen next.

Suddenly, she was startled by the first sound of friendship she'd heard since entering Au Fond de la Terre. Peering cautiously through the stems of the Rattlesnake Weeds, she saw a blue haze of dainty-looking flowers approaching gracefully. Squinting, she recognized the white centers with their sunny touches of yellow.

"Innocence!" Jodi called to them, knowing instinctively that the delicate petals could be trusted. As the pretty flowers moved closer, the tall weeds stiffened in resistance. A roar of protest went out from their dandelion heads and Jodi shrank back in terror, retreating further into her cell.

"Come with us," invited the still Innocence.

"I can't," cried Jodi. "The rattlesnakes will kill me if I try to

escape."

"Don't worry," the Innocence encouraged. "They're no match for us. We have a source of strength they know nothing of."

As they turned their clustered blooms skyward, their flower faces began to glow, dimly at first, then brighter and brighter, until finally, Jodi had to turn away. She blinked several times. Then, following their gaze, she saw a Sunflower bursting high into the sky, towering above all the other plants.

His single flowerhead was surrounded by a magnificent fringe of yellow ray flowers, each one sending forth rays of strength to the Innocence. The Sunflower's brilliance was overwhelming and Jodie shielded her eyes with trembling hands.

"Come! Now!" urged the blue petals. Jodi reached her arms toward the flowers. They swiftly enveloped her, lifting her high above the Rattlesnake Weeds, whose stems twisted and snarled in vain, trying to prevent her escape.

"We must see that you return home. You were not meant to live in darkness." The Innocence gently deposited Jodi on the ground, presumably safe from the evil weeds.

But just as suddenly as she'd been rescued, Jodi felt herself being smothered by thick, fleshy leaves that seemed to be made of grey-green rubber. Terror mingled with confusion as she looked up into the strikingly beautiful flower of a Bloodroot. It was pure white. Angelic-looking. Deceivingly lovely. Jodi felt her strength being drained as the deeply lobed leaves tightened their grip on her frail body.

"Ha! Did you really believe Innocence would triumph over the King Devil and all his evil followers? You must be as foolish as your Professor Lake and all the others who believe in light."

Jodi was nearing unconsciousness when she felt the sure, strong touch of yet another plant. A Pearly Everlasting wrapped one of his grasslike leaves of silk protectively around her. With his many other leaves, he slashed at the Bloodroot unmercifully, with a strength that belied his smooth texture. Thick crimson juice oozed from a break in the Bloodroot's stem, signaling the end of the confrontation.

The pale spray of delicate-looking flowers allowed a brief moment of celebration with Jodi.

"And now you really must leave this evil place. For though we have won this battle, the war between darkness and light will continue. You must return home and live in the light. There, you'll remain safe, protected. There, darkness has no hold on you."

The black air was stabbed by a sword of light. As Jodi closed her eyes, she felt herself being lifted by the great Sunflower's leaves, each drawing in razor-sharp teeth, so as not to scratch her tender skin. She nestled safely within their strong, secure embrace, and was raised higher.

She emerged, at last, from the depths of the earth; opening her eyes, she was relieved to see the familiar shelves of Professor Lake's library. There, on the walnut table beside the wing chair, lay Au Fond de la Terre.

Jodi approached the book cautiously. Sneering at her from within its pages was the Devil's Paintbrush, his blooms of fire red and burnt orange, just as she remembered. She quickly slammed the book shut and returned it to its place on the shelf.

"Why hello there, Jodi. I didn't realize you were still here. Have you found anything interesting to read?"

Jodi turned to look at the professor; a faraway look crossed her face. As she pondered his question, she realized the significance of their shared secret. The secret she would not soon forget. The secret of Au Fond de la Terre.

****

Jodi Bramel

I AM NOT PETITE

I am not petite
when you meet me on the street
For I'm very BIG,
I'm a very "BIG-WIG!"
But when I get inside,
Myself I have to hide
for I can't let you see
the me inside of me.

****

Judy Belfield

DEMITASSE

In small sips
she tastes the coffee minutes
of old mornings.
Shaded by jaded promises,
daylight drizzles like slush
on warm windows,
washes into the soil
like all things
lastly surrendering to earth.
She refills the cup,
watches clear brown
displace china,
porcelain become liquid.
Yesterdays settle
on the bitter section
of her tongue,
refuse to be sweetened
or swallowed.
This day
she'll seem to be the same person
she's always been
but something unseen
will grab her neck
with ferocious strength
and not let go.

****

M. RamZ

THE MUSIC MAN

Eddie liked to sour the air with the taste
of his insides,
which he graciously brought outside
with the warning of a huge trumpet blat.
All of us, barring Eddie, fanned the air
and turned green,
screaming at him, damning him
as the processed Old Style and White Castles
cornered
the air market.
That's about all Eddie was good for,
but at least he gave graciously;
he was the best,

****

Melody Liebenow

MORETHANSMALL

As you lay on a summer's day
In a warm and sunny place,
Don't look up into the skies;
Instead, look down
And squint your eyes.
Squint them both so very tight
That if you look
With all your might
You'll find the land of Morethansmall.
And in this land are bugs,
That's all.

****

Sharon Peck

FROM THE MOUTHS OF BABES

In bringing up my six year old,
I've learned that he can be quite bold.
He often says what's on his mind,
Not knowing that it sounds unkind.

For instance, just the other day,
It caused great pain to hear him say,
"You sure look pretty dressed like that,
But, Mommy, why are you so fat?"

I threw my arms up in despair,
And saw the source of my grey hair.
I clenched my teeth and forced a smile,
But thought of MURDER all the while.

I wisely counted up to ten,
And soon was in control again.
I gently touched him on the head,
And sweetly said, "PLEASE GO TO BED!"

"But, Mommy, I don't need a nap.
I want to sit here, on your lap.
I love you, Mommy, don't you know?
Please let me stay, don't make me go."

I brushed a teardrop from my cheek,
And then my knees grew slightly weak.
I felt myself begin to mellow,
But then I heard him say, "like Jello."

"LIKE JELLO!" I began to scream,

(continued)

From the Mouths of Babes, continued

"WHAT DID YOU SAY? WHAT DID YOU MEAN?"
"That's what your lap reminds me of,"
He spoke with tender words of love.

"Your lap is round and soft," he said,
"It makes a pillow for my head."
I looked into his eyes of blue,
And sighed, for what he said was true.

Although I really was perturbed
By all these things that I had heard,
I sat my youngster on my knee,
And held him very close to me.

The moral of this seems to be
That truth is often hard to see,
And there are times it really hurts
When coming from the mouths of squirts!

****

M. RamZ

THE SEA CRADLE

The waves fought their way to shore, crashing into each other and exploding with white hissing foam; by the time they reached the glistening sandy coast, they had all but expired and rolled meekly in. The air of the beach was thick with salt, and when Nicole breathed in the morning air, it was as if she drank the sea. The ocean's tongue lapped gently at her ankles.

And how do I taste to you?

The dark blue back of the sea, stretching for miles across the horizon, sparkled with the diamonds of the morning sun.

Thou art lovely, my lass. Would that I had one such as thee in my world.

The pale young woman, the bottom of her nightgown floating heavily about her feet, put her small hands to her breast, but no warmth could she feel. Her feet she had already lost to the icy undulating pool; the harsh endless cooing of the sea whispered into her ears.

Join me, Nicole.

Nicole sighed deeply and slowly threw back her head, so that her braided moist locks caressed her bare back. She shivered deeply.

I am afraid.

Her blue lips smiled abashedly as her eyes remained dreamily closed; still the sea accosted her, trying to reach her thin shaking calves.

Trust the sea.

Nicole could not: yet she remained, shaking and heaving as a glow warmed her cheeks. She remembered sadly the young man, Roger. Somewhere, miles away and cold leagues deep, he slept upon a gritty coral floor, with others as flooded as he.

Your love is buried deep within me, Nicole.

The emptiness burned within her, swelling, and the tears rolled down to her quivering chin.

It's not fair.

The sea had reached her knees; its pressure pushed them apart gently. Nicole looked out through blurry tearful eyes and saw the tall gray lighthouse out on the rocks a mile away, making its valiant stand. The seagulls, like faraway slivers of paper, flew hysterically about, dipping now and then to the water to swallow fish.

Nay, not fair; but you came to me, Nicole.

Nicole nodded sadly. The cold wetness had reached her buttocks, and, lacking balance, her bare arms flailed softly.

So young are thee, Nicole. All those nights alone, my lass. All those tears which, amassed, could rival me. It does not have to be.

The young woman sang almost giddily to herself, the harsh foul song of a sailor that she'd heard so many times in the evening.

I want him back so . . .

Suddenly the sea, like a slowly penetrating dagger, sliced into the small of her back, making her cry out in pain. Though she could scarcely feel her legs, she knew they would not stand fast very much longer.

I will bring him to thee, but you must come closer, my love.

Nicole moved forward and her breasts were submerged in the cold frothy ocean. She could smell the decay, the bloated compost that, great or small, rode the

(continued)

surface in limbo. She shivered but felt suppressed in the force of the sea.

Yes, come closer, love. I have brought Roger home. But first thou must be mine.

The vibrating sea churned around her neck, wetting and whipping her dismayed blonde locks, which were now waterlogged and dark.

Come, my love. Roger is here. But first thou must drink of me. Thou hast a whole ocean to sip, my love. Come forward.

Nicole closed her eyes and fell forward into the cradle of the twisting waves. The coldness encompassed her head and stiffened her back. Her arms opened and she took in the cold sea water greedily. Her lungs were host to the bitter sea.

She could hear the sea beneath the surface, and it made a thudding, depthful sound, much like a heartbeat. She sank into darkness.

Roger . . .

The arms reached her and embraced her strongly. She was lifted upward and the sea dripped off her. She began coughing violently, expurgating the warmed sea water from her lungs.

The fisherman grunted and struggled, but he was strong enough to pull the young woman from the waves. He made it to shore with her, and he carried her up to the dry, semi-warm sand, where he laid her down and pressed back, forcing the salt water out. She breathed, though difficultly.

Exhausted and wet, he sat back on the sand and looked out quizzically to the sea. His old tobacco brown eyes found no answers, and his bearded grim face frowned in ignorance.

The sea lashed angrily against the rocks, cursing, cursing, cursing.

****

James Burkey

I REALLY HATE FANATICS

I really hate fanatics.
They get me so appalled.
I think we should line 'em up
And shoot them all.

****

Jodi Bramel

NATHAN

I imagine you a tall, slender
boy with a ghostly color of white,
(painfully frail),
at your piano bench, veins exposed,
with big nostrils and hairy brows,
whining to your mother who
worries a lot and wishes
you would play
football.

****

Sharon Peck

EXCUSE THIS CHURCH

Some churches try to hide the fact
That kids are welcome there.
Ours boasts of it quite openly,
The signs are everywhere.

For stains are in the carpet,
And smudges on the door:
We really should apologize
For scuff marks on the floor.

But we knelt down with the children
And prayed and played and read.
If our doorknobs do not shine,
Their eyes will shine instead.

If the Lord returned today
To take a look around,
Do you think he'd be offended
By the mess that might be found?

Or would his eyes see something more
That others fail to see?
Would he say those loving words:
"Let the children come to me"?

Our children are a gift from God,
A blessing from above.
Do they really need a spotless church,
Or do they need our love?

****

M. RamZ

DEATH IS SEDUCTIVE IN THE FALL, I ADMIT

it is easy to stare at the suffering leaves,
each one a hanging, flapping, orange flag
of honor,
soon to let go and be trod underfoot.
but there are those who valiantly cling,
though they become brown and bill-like,
and ugly against the skyward reaching, crooked
arms of their father.
these too must fall and
they are fools to think that they can
hang on forever,
or that I will pity them any less
with my shoes.

****

James Burkey

THE DISCOVERY OF DARKNESS

I had been in the midst of my travels through old Europe when I found the old man, lying by the side of the road. It was just coming on nightfall and I still had many miles to walk before the next village, and up to this point I had seen very little sign of any other human beings. Even the animals were quiet this evening, as though they knew something eerie was going to occur, and they waited in silent expectation. A wolf howl arose from the dark woods that engulfed most of the region, and the Alps, tall and forboding, rose up out of the darkness before me, appearing to be just a few short miles away, but in actuality a good week's journey. I had been hiking through old Europe for months now, thinking of writing some sort of book on the subject, and had come out in this near-forgotten part of the world, and to this particular area, because I had heard some strange tales a few nights before about this land, dealing with men born with goat heads, vampires, werewolves, ill luck, the evil eye, and other such superstitious nonsense. I hoped to actually meet someone who still believed in these old wives' tales and stories, in the age of rockets, atom bombs and automobiles, knowing it would prove interesting and maybe worth a chapter in my book.

My hike would have to wait, however, along with my book, because more pressing matters are afoot. My finding this old man on the side of the road changed all this, as I would soon discover. He was still semi-conscious, moaning and crying out to the Blessed Virgin and such saints, and as I drew near, he looked up into my eyes and stammered in broken German, "Stand away from me, stranger, until you identify yourself."

"My God, your leg!" I said, ignoring him. His leg was bleeding profusely from a long ragged gash that went from his knee to his ankle.

"I said to keep away!" He gasped, raising a fist, weakly, as though he was going to fend me off, physically if need be. However, he soon dropped his arm, and, calling on the Holy Mother of God, passed out.

By the time he awakened it was nearing dawn. The fire was burning low, but the coals writhed and steamed as a bit of dew began to form.

"My . . . my leg?" he said, his voice much stronger now.

"I have it wrapped up and in a splint. You should be able to walk, slowly, with me to the nearest village where you can get better attention."

"I don't know how to thank you..."

"You don't really have to," I replied, using a stick to stir up the fire a bit. My new companion stared into the flames a bit, and then looked back up at me.

"Friend, I do not know who you are but that you are a foreigner, and so I do not know your customs. In my country, however, WE have a requirement placed on us to return favors any way we can. I am indebted to you, sir, and I am your servant until you decide the service has been paid in full."

"Come now, old man, I would have done the same thing for anybody, and I expect that if it were I that was hurt and you walking past, you would have saved me, so I cannot expect anything but your gratitude of you."

(continued)

"I'm afraid I must insist."

"Fine, if you must." I thought for a moment, and then asked him to tell me of his life.

"Ah, and why would you want to know that?" He seemed a little more withdrawn now, a little more cautious, as though something about my question bothered him.

"I am a professional writer," I replied, "from America. I am writing a book on old Europe, and your tale would surely be a perfect piece to add to my book."

"I see." He stared at the flames a bit more, as though pondering what to do. I began cleaning up and preparing for travel when he spoke at last.

"My friend, I cannot tell you my tale until I am sure of some things from you, and then you may decide just how much you truly want to put in this book you write. Until I do reveal this story to you, I am your servant."

"Fine. Let's get going. There is a village about a day's journey from here, though, with that leg, I doubt we'll make it before nightfall. Can you walk?"

He got up and tested his leg. I could see the discomfort he was in on his face, but he said he felt he'd be fine, so after packing up my gear, we began walking, he using my walking cane from Zurich as a crutch.

As we walked we conversed on his country and his people, their customs and society, and after our stop for lunch, he seemed very pleased to have made my acquaintance.

"You are a fine friend, you American. It is too bad you know so little of the world as it really is."

"Oh, come now, my friend. I have studied at many of the great universities of the world, travelled through many countries, and seen many strange things. What makes you think I know so little?"

"You simply would not understand, you Americans with your cars and weapons and instant coffee. You are simply from another world, a world full of science and deep thoughts designed to hide the truth from your eyes! A world specifically designed for the coming of the Darkness."

"I'm not sure of what you speak, old man, but you have the sound of a religious fanatic."

"There, you see. You are blessed with sight and yet you remain blind. The Darkness has hidden the truth from your eyes, so that when it comes, you will not know it for what it is until you are a bloodless corpse."

I began to doubt my comrade's sanity, but said nothing. We soon entered a darker part of the forest, where the strange, twisted trees reached up and clawed at the sky above with gnarled, grasping branches. The trees, claimed the old man, were dark firs, evil trees planted by some dark, forgotten king long ago, and to this day people have been known to disappear in the woods, perhaps captured by these very trees.

I laughed at the tale, and at the notions my new friend had, and we walked on. The old man, I noticed, walked much more quickly than before, as though he truly believed his legends. His leg must be healing quickly, at an amazing rate, to say the least, for him to do so. I hurried up my pace, in order to keep in step, and we walked on through the black woods, glancing about occasionally. My companion's fear was making me nervous.

Night was beginning to fall as we came upon the village. An owl hooted, its call being answered moments later by a rasping blackbird. It was fairly quiet as we entered the small church that stood at the foot of a large hill, just on the outskirts of the village, and I knew that if we needed help, that is where we could find it.

My friend insisted on going first, and pushing the door open with his foot, he slowly strode in. He looked this way and that in the blackness of the unlit room, and then muttered something to himself that I couldn't understand.

"Strange," I said, "the priest should be here, unless he went into town for something . . . "

"No, the priest is gone."

Not understanding, I replied, "Yes, but he'll surely be back."

"No, he's gone. Either dead and buried, escaped with his life, or one of them now."

"What do you mean, 'one of them now'? You've been awfully cryptic."

"Perhaps I do owe you an explana-

(continued)

tion. Sit down and I will tell you my story."

I sat down on a small cot and leaned back, strangely nervous about the whole thing.

"Many years ago, almost too numerable to count, I was working on a farm, trying to earn some money to support myself. My wife and child had died in a plague some years before, and so I was a lonely, bitter man, but the farmer hired me, in his kindness, and gave me run of the place when he was away. It was one of these times that he was gone that I met the Dark Man."

"The Dark Man?" I asked. "This is getting stranger and stranger..."

"The night before I met him had been very disturbing, with lightning and thunder, and yet no rain, strange red lights lit up the horizon, as if some terrible fire were burning, and yet there was no smoke to be seen. Animals stayed hidden deep in their nests and wolves howled throughout the night. By midnight the moon was turning the color of blood, and bats and wolves could be seen running about, as though they were aware of what was going on."

"What did you do?"

"We locked all the doors and had our axes handy, but none of the wolves approached us. Then, near dawn, a heavy, grey fog rolled in from the direction of the lights, and engulfed our cottage. The other farmhands fled in terror, running back to the village some twelve miles away, but I stayed, knowing that if I left the farmer would have me arrested for leaving my charge."

There was some kind of commotion in the village, but it quieted down moments later.

"Just as the sun was peeking over the edge of the foothills, a knock was at the door. An urgent, frantic knocking. Assuming it to be one of the farmhands, I quickly dashed over and opened the door."

"Who was it?"

"A very peculiar man, dressed in fine garments fit for a king. His eyes were bloodshot and he was drawn and haggard looking, and seemed to have been in some terrible fight, for his clothes were torn and bloodied, and he had several wounds. He looked up at me from his half kneeling, half standing position, and then keeled over. I figured he must be some noble, or some rich man from one of the greater cities, so I brought him inside, closed the door, and put him in the master's room. He slept soundly for two days, and then, finally woke up. He thanked me for saving him, and, without a second thought, asked for some raw meat. I did his bidding quickly, fearing that he may have me beheaded if I delayed at my task, and he thanked me again. I made a move to draw open the shades, in order to let in some light, now that he was awake, and that is when I realized something strange was occurring. His hand reached out like the flick of a whip and grabbed my arm. His hand gripped me so hard I almost screamed, and he ordered me to never open that window, or he would surely die, and he'd take me with him."

"I don't understand, was he sensitive to bright light?"

"In a sense, just listen. I kept on bringing him meat, raw when possible, and he slowly grew back to health. But when he saw that I had no more meat, he said that from now on all I had to do was open the door and howl like a wolf, and within an hour there would be fresh meat at the doorstep. Doing as he bid me, I howled, and soon enough two of the largest wolves I have ever seen came forth from the woods with a wold stag being dragged between them. Soon, other strange things began to happen. Bats flew in and out repeatedly, as though they were bringing message to him, and wolves could be seen prowling about, as though keeping guard over him.

I asked him of it and he only replied that they were watching over their master, which is when I realized a bit more of what was happening."

"What was that?" A yell arose from outside, somewhere nearby, that sounded like some kind of demon from hell. I shivered.

"Ignore it for a bit more. Finally, after a month, he informed me that he would be leaving. It was

(continued)

then he revealed himself to me in all his dark majesty and splendor."

"So he was a nobleman?"

"No. He was a lord. A lord of darkness and evil in all its power."

"What do you mean?"

"He was the lord of the Vampyrs, the Dark Man himself!"

"Oh come on now, my friend, you are starting to sound like a bad version of a Bram Stoker novel!"

"I know nothing of this Stoker..."

"He wrote a novel called Dracula, about this vampire that went around sucking blood and turning into bats and..."

"Yes! Yes! Exactly! If this Dracula is the infamous Vlad Dracul, who was a count and slayer of hundreds of Turks..."

"Yes, I believe that is how the story goes..."

"Well, Count Dracul was famous for one other thing, too. He not only killed these Turks himself, he drained them of their blood and put their bloodless bodies on stakes outside of his keep. No one knows for sure how he drained them, but everyone knew that their Count was eternally young, and even more interestingly, he never appeared in daylight after his meeting with the Dark Man."

"Here's this 'Dark Man' again..."

"Yes. You see, the Dark Man came to the Count one night before the Count's first battle with the Turks. Apparently they made some kind of deal, because after that the Count Dracul wielded incredible power and saw the Dark Man often."

"And what do you think their deal was?"

"The Dark Man made him into a vampyr and took a vow of allegiance from him, and thus made him the Right Hand of Darkness."

"So what does this have to do with you?"

"Well, Dracul kept getting more and more powerful, and, in his pride, dared to rise up against his dark master and try to overthrow him and become the lord of the Darkness. But the Count was foolish to think he, a fairly young, albeit powerful vampire, could hope to kill the King of the Vampyrs, one who was older than civilization! But the Count Dracul did wound his master, and thus, once the Dark Man had slain the Count, he needed to heal and in his weakened condition he could go no further than to the cottage where I was."

"Are you trying to say that you met the Dark Man just after his battle with Dracula?"

"Yes, I am." His voice was strong and quite forceful, grim.

"But that would make you hundreds of years old! That is impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible, my friend."

"So what did he offer you?!?" All this was beginning to make my head spin. This old man must be a lunatic!

"He offered me the chance to become something more than human, something more powerful than what I was. He understood that I had suffered, that I was sick of being weak, and so he offered me power."

"And...?"

"And I took it, and became the Right Hand of Darkness to replace the traitor Dracul."

"So you are...a vampire?" I asked strangely frightened.

"No, but I am no longer human."

Just then, a torch crashed through the window, setting the drapes on fire. A strange, inhuman laughter could be heard outside, and a chorus of wolves howled in a bloodcurdling harmony.

"Come! This place will be an inferno in seconds!" My friend grabbed my arm and yanked me towards the priest's chambers.

"We have to get out of here!" I screamed, confused and panicking.

"Yes, I know! Help me move this chest!"

We worked together to move the large cedar chest aside, and beneath it was a trap door that led to an underground tunnel, apparently leading to the hill behind the church.

"Good, I see the priest had some idea of what can happen in the land where Darkness reigns supreme! Grab some kind of weapon!"

I had a revolver on me, but I decided to grab a log from out of the fireplace too. The one I grabbed had been sharpened to a point on one end.

"I guess the priest knew more than I thought," the old man said, glancing at my stick. He jumped down into the

(continued)

tunnel and disappeared. Pausing for a moment, I glanced about for some clue of what was going on. Just then I heard the sound of breaking glass, and I knew someone or something had jumped in the window in the other room. I quickly entered the tunnel and sealed it behind me.

It was pitch black in the cavern, but, using my hands, I soon discovered the path and followed it to its conclusion. My friend waited there for me, hidden in the bushes that surrounded the opening.

"Before we go any further, I want to warn you," he said. "We are dealing with things beyond you. Do not attempt to fight them, just run and keep on running. If they catch you, they will kill you or make you one of them."

"But..."

"Let's go!" He sprinted out of the hole and bushes, ripping off his splint as he did so. His leg had completely healed!

I quickly got up and sprinted after him, and we ran for a few moments before things started happening. First, we heard voices that cried out of our escape. Seconds passed, and then the whole forest seemed to come alive, as wolves, bats, night owls, and other such creatures could be seen and heard. We kept running and now I truly understood that it was for more than just our lives.

My friend got ahead of me, slowly but surely, and it seemed to me that he must have unvelievable stamina to run so fast and far without even breathing hard.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sudden snarling and snapping of a great wolf at my heels. I tried to fend it off with my gun firing several shots point blank into its head, but it didn't even faze the beast.

I fired one last shot before I tripped over a root and fell, cracking my head on a stone. I must have passed out momentarily, because when I looked up, the wolf was gone and a young man stood before me.

"Help me..," I said, reaching up my hand.

He grabbed me by my arm with one hand and lifted me off of the ground, Laughing, as he watched me dangle and gape at his display of strength, he said in a chill, dark voice, "Greetings, human. I have been tracking you and your companion for a long time now...!"

"Who are you??" I choked, frightened.

"I am your death, and your rebirth..." He smiled, and his two canine teeth jutted out over his bottom lips, like the fangs of a cobra.

"God in Heaven...!" I gasped. "The old man wasn't lying!"

"No, that he wasn't. Now where is he?"

"I don't know! He outran me!"

"Don't lie to me, human!" The vampire threw me several yards, square into a tree. I lay there, semiconscious.

"Old man! Help me!" I cried, weakly.

"He can't help you now, remember? He deserted you!"

His mouth opened wider, and his fangs gleamed in the moonlight as he tensed to leap at me. His eyes, red and evil, held me in thrall, so that I could not move. Something was controlling me, and I could only watch as the creature leapt at me, fangs bared.

"NO!!!" cried a voice, deep and mighty. The power of it shook off the hypnotic effect, and I reacted on pure instinct, bringing up my log from the priest's room as the vampire came crashing down on me.

"AAAAIIIGHHH!" it screamed as the wooden stake pierced through its chest and out its back. Oddly enough, no blood came from the terrible wound.

"Run!" cried the old man, who had saved me. "There's still more of them, and some of them know better than to try the hypnosis when I am around."

I followed him through brush and forest until we finally came to a running river, where, to my surprise, lay a boat.

"Get in quick!" he cried. We climbed aboard, and, just as we pushed off the vampires caught up to us.

"Why aren't they following us?" I asked, seeing the wolves and bats and villagers all staring in their red-eyed hatred, and yet moving no closer.

"To all but the greatest of vampyrs, running water, especially from pure mountain snow, can destroy their mortal forms."

"So we are safe?"

(continued)

"No, we'll never be safe again, not until the Dark Man and all his minions are destroyed! Not until we disperse the Darkness."

"Why do you call it 'the Darkness'?"

"Because that is what they call themselves. You see, the Dark Man, thousands of years ago, was the high mage of Atlantis. He worked great magics, and, in his quest to gain the utmost power, cast a spell that rent asunder the very fabric of reality and time. He gained great power, though at the cost of his mortal soul, and became the first and greatest Vampyr. The spell, however, shook the earth and caused the destruction and sinking of Atlantis, not that the Dark Man truly cared. So, he went forth into the world, creating vampyrs and working other magics to create other such vile creatures as the Werewolves, Ghouls, and unique humans like myself. He formed an organization, full of witches and warlocks, archpriests and undead, and he called them the servants of the Darkness. However, there are rogues, such as myself, who saw the great evil and fled from it, and they are not of the Darkness, but are yet dark beings. The cult grew to power on several occasions, having a hand in the Roman Empire. The Druids, the Nazis, and now they have decided to leave the mother continent and journey to America. They are many, and they are diverse, and have many under their thrall. Doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers, taxidrivers, all kinds of people have become part of the Darkness."

"We've got to stop them!"

"Yes, we do. When one becomes part of the dark world, there is a certain power in names. One does not give out names to someone they don't trust implicitly, you see, because that can give that person power over them, or, on the other hand, give that person the ability to call on that person. My name is Boris Justavik, and I am indebted to you and trust you with my life."

"And I, I pledge myself to the destruction of the Darkness, to hunt out these creatures wherever they may show, to stop the spread of their foul cancer on my people, and the people of the Earth. My name is Jonathan Slade, and I am sworn to do the impossible. I am sworn to slay the Darkness.

****

Jacque Kuriger

HER CHAIR SITS EMPTY

She left us, giving us thirty days to
say goodbye,
Yet, never knowing she was going
away.

Through the family she moved:
biting,
barracuda broad,
Her razor tongue, cutting our lives
closer to perfection.

That night,
I held your hand, as you held onto
life...till
Life released you.
You went away, not as a gentle, floating
spirit,
But,
As a powerful push of luminous
energy.
Bursting forth into your new world,
with the same vigor you shared with
us.

****

Donna Aiello

THE WAITING PLACE

Amy leaned back on the crooked fence post, watching the cows, with their heads hanging low, steadily chewing the long, green grass while the broad, proud horses swatted flies with their tails. There was a soft steady wind blowing her hair against her cheeks and forcing the fields to ripple and move like the waves on the pond behind the house.

She heard a ka-thump from behind, and knew more apples were falling from high in the tree. There were already four bushels on the back porch ready to be made into pies, apple butter and apple sauce.

Amy could see the lights go on in the old house from across the fields. "Mom and Dad must have turned on the TV and settled for the evening," she

(continued)

Judy Belfield

A TRIP TO THE DEPOT
ON GOSSAMER WINGS

Fingers spread painfully apart
small hands span walls
marble-skinned, Italian-veined,
as if measuring a horse
sideways: right, left, right--
marking age this way.
Thirty-five summers gone by
as quickly as the trains
on the tracks above
minus the sound
of home-again wheels.
Small fingers
feel a faint pulse
in the cool wall,
when suddenly--
hands expand
legs lengthen
walls shrink and
lose magnificence
in dust where magic lived
one yesterday

****

Ellyn Bryce

SUNDAY FEELINGS

The flowers she held in her hands
Were given to her by him
Tiny white daisies and
Little pink clovers
Casting fragrances in the hot June air

He sat on the ground and picked them
Pulling up dirt and bugs
His eyes couldn't see their faces
But his senses told him a lot
Her child with the smile and freckled
laugh

****

James Burkey

THE SILLY KING RAISED A TAX

The silly king raised a tax
Without checking all his facts.
His people poor
could give no more.
So the king lost his head to an axe.

****

Jodi Bramel

A FAMILY VACATION

We all got into the car with
bags and boxes
off to see the world.
Spotted with motels, and
severed in two by gaping highways.
Speeding along, the wheels hum, and the
car smells like food--and grape bubble
gum,
pages of a coloring book, and gas station
soap.
My father stops the car to guy gas,
and out we tumble. Squinting, and
unbending crooked legs.
At night we go to a smoke-filled room
where someone else had slept
the night before.
We lay our heads down only to awaken
one minute later.
Then it's back to the car,
to worlds covered by glass,
smudged with fingerprints,
smelling like grape bubble gum
and pages of coloring books.

****

Judy Belfield

HOLIDAY LADY

At Halloween
she appears
sallow-faced
sunken eyes lacy-lashed
arms delicate bisque,
gaunt figure--
wispy, waspish,
specter-thin.
Endless shadows
wrap the memories
behind her propriety
in a scent of disease
tied with bleak bows.
At Halloween
she appears
year after year
in the tall window
of a sunny bedroom,
watches blackbird flocks
pepper the sky,
then slips back into
nebulous existence
halfway between now and yesterday
not caring a bit.

****

whispered to no one. She didn't mind living with Ted's parents. They were good to her, even though she knew nothing about farming. She missed the city sometimes, but Ted loved it here so she would too. Eventually.

The sun was setting leaving lines of crayola colors as it sank below the earth's line. Crickets began chirping as it darkened, leaving Amy feeling lonely and anxious. This was her favorite place to run and hide. And wait.

She stood waiting, when a flock of crows flew squawking from one of the trees closer to the house. She didn't turn in their direction, knowing something or someone must have disturbed them from their quiet retreat. She stood very still until the pounding could be felt vibrating closer and closer to her place.

Amy stood and took a few steps away from the post, turning to face a dark figure riding very fast toward her. She felt strong arms reach down and around her waist, grabbing with a force to lift her upon the bare back of the sweating animal. She felt like an old rag doll as the rider sat her close to him positioning her safely within his strong, steady arms. She could hear the rapid beat of his heart with her ear pressed flat against his chest.

They rode the fields, thundering through like a wind high in the branches of the great oaks. She felt his arms pull in the reins suddenly, causing the big black horse to rear its front legs high into the air.

The sky was midnight blue and the wind was stronger and colder as they slowed and finally stopped in front of a small lean-to far back into the fields. His arm went to a bundle tied to his waist and brought a heavy quilt with them as he jumped off the horse, tightening his grip on her waist to bring her down with him.

She stood, her knees shaking and teeth chattering, held against his full rough body. She could feel the rising almost panting heat seep through the long flowing poncho he wore.

His face was shadowed, showing only the stark outlines of curved cheekbones and a square chin. He swept her up, walking toward the straw-lined shelter. He spread the large, thick quilt on top of the bed of straw and kneeling in the center, took her hand and gently pulled her toward him.

Amy felt her stomach tighten and her palms grow moist and slippery as she knelt beside him. Her lips felt his eager kiss as the straw crunched and gave way to their bodies laying in its warmth.

Her shoulders quivered as the cool night air swirled around the lean-to and brushed the naked skin while the heat growing within rose too high to be overtaken.

A storm was building. The structure shook and rattled over and over until thunder peaked and lightning jaggedly spent itself, leaving an eerie calm over the two bodies huddled under the rider's poncho.

They lay there, looking out over the restless fields, listening to the rain falling on fat leaves above and the wind whistle through the wood behind.

"How long can you stay?" she asked.

"Until after the harvest. I promised Dad I'd be here to help."

"Are you going to be home for Christmas?" she asked hopefully.

"I hope so," he told her without much conviction. "Listen, if I keep at the factory until Spring, we'll have the loan paid for and no more working 200 miles from home. We'll be free and clear, Amy."

"I know, Ted," she said trying to sound as optimistic as he needed to hear

After a silence held them for a moment, Amy smiled and looked at his still shadowed face.

"What about our reunions? If you're here all the time, how are you going to surprise me?"

"Don't worry," he told her, holding tighter under the poncho. "We'll figure a way."

They both laughed and wiggled deeper into the warmth, drifting off into their private storm once more.

****

Judy Belfield

HOLLYWOOD SUMMER

In Hollywood summer
the heat of eight-lane traffic
wriggles up from the asphalt
and shimmers in the sun.
An expectation of progression
from gray to glitter
takes on glamour like eyeshadow,
slips out of Kansas-cream skin
as quickly as a name-change alters soul.
The sham is as colorless
as the hearts of magicians
who believe their lies
are acts of gods.
In Hollywood summer
a yesterday hotel stands tall,
crisply etched against a Pacific sunset.
Curtains flutter as soundlessly
as the ghosts on a black and white movie
screen,
flutter like the last breaths
of silent films
and linger in suspended dust
not dropped from stars
but brushed from the seams of illusion.

****

Barbara Pillasch

DEAR TEACH

I'm thankful this semester's through,
I have no more to write for you,
Class ended in the nick of time,
My writing isn't worth a dime,
My brain's dried up and turned to dust,
There's nothing left but must and rust.

I sit and stare and try to write,
In bed I toss and turn all night,
Because my next assignment's due,
I've tried to think of something new,
But--no new ideas come to my head--
My brain has just rolled over dead.

P. S.

Your class has been a total pleasure,
And what I've learned I'll always teasure.

****

Jacque Kuriger

HOW SMART ARE YOU?

A wizened man came to me and said,
"Speak to me of your knowledge."
And I replied:
"Chaucer is fun filth,
Poe is purified terror
Science gives the answer to children's
'Why,'
History is the bygone dream of long-
gone relatives."
But he stopped me with his grimace and
low hung head.
Then I questioned him:
"You think me shallow, but why?
Perhaps because I look at life
with mirth, not
monstrous burden.
I know my incapabilities, my
limitations, and
revel
at what wisdom I may find
And yet while wanting always more,
I'm happy with
the world's unfolding to me, and
don't fear un-
knowledge.
Life is short and I choose not to
be illustriously
intelligent, but ever eager for more
ideas.
I live to learn, not learn to live."

****

"WORDEATER 62"

Joliet Junior College